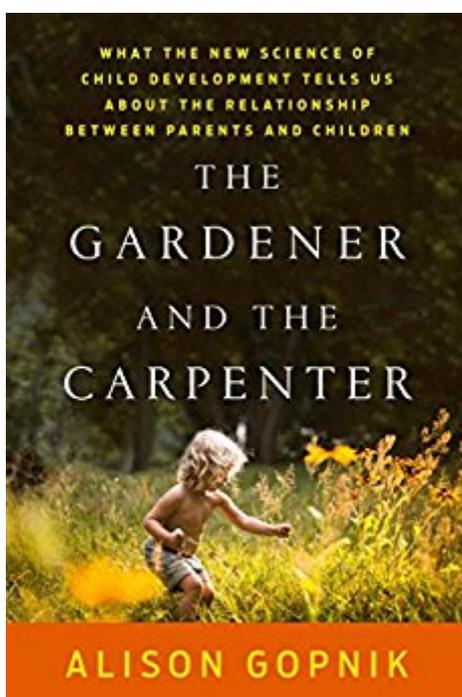


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The Gardener And The Carpenter: What The New Science Of Child Development Tells Us About The Relationship Between Parents And Children



Synopsis

One of the world's leading child psychologists shatters the myth of "good parenting" Caring deeply about our children is part of what makes us human. Yet the thing we call "parenting" is a surprisingly new invention. In the past thirty years, the concept of parenting and the multibillion dollar industry surrounding it have transformed child care into obsessive, controlling, and goal-oriented labor intended to create a particular kind of child and therefore a particular kind of adult. In *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, the pioneering developmental psychologist and philosopher Alison Gopnik argues that the familiar twenty-first-century picture of parents and children is profoundly wrong--it's not just based on bad science, it's bad for kids and parents, too. Drawing on the study of human evolution and her own cutting-edge scientific research into how children learn, Gopnik shows that although caring for children is profoundly important, it is not a matter of shaping them to turn out a particular way. Children are designed to be messy and unpredictable, playful and imaginative, and to be very different both from their parents and from each other. The variability and flexibility of childhood lets them innovate, create, and survive in an unpredictable world. "Parenting" won't make children learn—but caring parents let children learn by creating a secure, loving environment.

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Gopnik's gardener/carpenter metaphor goes to the heart of the way children are seen in modern America, epitomized by the recent coinage "parenting." A gardener supports animate objects as they grow according to their own internal nature. A carpenter shapes inanimate objects entirely according to his own will. In Gopnik's words: "In the parenting model, being a parent is like being a carpenter. You should pay some attention to the kind of material you are working with, and it may have some influence on what you try to do." But essentially your job is to shape that material into a final product that will fit the scheme you had in mind to begin with. And you can assess how good a job you've done by looking at the finished product. Are the doors true? Are the chairs steady? Messiness and variability are a carpenter's enemies; precision and control are her allies. Measure twice, cut once. "When we garden, on the other hand, we create a protected and nurturing space for plants to flourish. It takes hard labor and the sweat of our brows, with a lot of exhausted digging and wallowing in manure. And as any gardener knows, our specific plans are always thwarted. The poppy comes up neon orange instead of pale pink, the rose that was supposed to climb the fence stubbornly remains a foot from the ground, black spot and rust and aphids can never be defeated." The objective of parenting is to produce straight-A students, lawyers and other such well-defined products. She argues that the objective should be to produce successful, self-reliant adults. She is equally critical of school systems, with their emphasis on standardized testing and achievement measured by grades. She notes that school is a recent invention.

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